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SUBJECT: INEC'S FEATHERS RUFFLED, THEN SMOOTHED, AFTER
NEWSPAPER ATTRIBUTES ANONYMOUS COMMENTS TO EMBASSY

1. Summary: In an August 8 front page article, a Nigerian newspaper printed an article highly critical of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman Maurice Iwu. The article claimed to be based on comments from an anonymous US Embassy source. Both INEC and the USAID-funded NGO working with INEC to improve capacity, the International Federation for Election Systems (IFES), contacted the Embassy with concerns about the article, and we assured them that there was no Embassy source for the article. End Summary.

2. An IFES officer called the Embassy on the evening of August 8 to seek clarification on an article printed in the Nigerian Tribune that day. The IFES officer advised that both IFES and INEC were upset by the article. (Note: IFES receives USAID funding to build capacity at INEC. End Note.)

3. Because that newspaper, based in Ibadan, has a regional focus and a reputation as a tabloid, the POL section does not receive it, but Poloff located the article online at "<http://www.tribune.com.ng/080805/news01.htm>". The article claimed that an anonymous "competent source within the US Embassy in Nigeria" had said the U.S. was suspicious of Iwu and INEC, and had "directed" the EU and other countries to monitor INEC more closely.

4. Poloff assured the IFES officer that no Embassy official had made any such remarks to the Nigerian Tribune or to any other journalist. The IFES officer accepted Poloff's explanation. He said that INEC Chairman Iwu would shortly be leaving for Washington on a previously planned trip to meet with State and USAID officials, and that Iwu was still upset about the article.

5. As Poloff attempted to call Iwu, the Embassy received a letter from Steve Osemeke, INEC's Public Affairs Director, objecting to the remarks attributed to the anonymous Embassy official, and requesting that we "speak on the status of the story." Osemeke called Poloff, and when he learned that Poloff was trying to call Iwu, Osemeke gave Poloff Iwu's private office number.

6. Poloff spoke with INEC Chairman Iwu for about five minutes. Iwu insisted that if the Embassy had said these things, it would "poison" the solid relationship that INEC, IFES, and USAID currently enjoy. Poloff assured Iwu that no Embassy official had made these remarks to any journalist. When Poloff apologized for the confusion caused by the situation, Iwu broke the tension by laughing and telling Poloff not to worry: "it's not your fault, or your Embassy." He requested that the Embassy reply in writing to Osemeke's letter, and Poloff agreed. Iwu said he was looking forward to his U.S. trip and had lived in the U.S. for some ten years when he was younger.

7. Comment: It is possible that the Nigerian Tribune article is the latest shot in a feud between Iwu and a former leader of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) party over a report INEC had prepared on APGA's finances that led to the APGA leader's ouster. Then again, it is also possible that the Nigerian Tribune was simply seeking a sensational headline to sell a few more copies. End Comment.

CAMPBELL